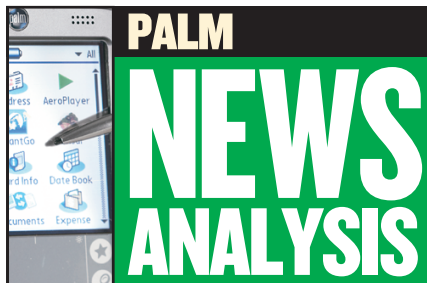


PALM Expert

If you have video files on your Palm's memory card, you need a way to play them. Julian Prokaza looks at two applications that will have you enjoying movies on the move in no time



The recent launch of the Windows Mobile-powered Treo 700w is an undeniable coup for Palm and one that will bolster its bottom line, but it has set the cat among the pigeons. Many users are up in arms that Palm has joined the 'dark side', and developers are worried that Palm OS will be left in the cold now that Palm has snuggled up to Microsoft.

The panic reached crisis point in November, forcing Palm CEO Ed Colligan to release an open letter, in which he stated: "Our Palm OS customer loyalty is extremely high... and it is not our intent to walk away from such a strong and loyal user base."

This spot of damage limitation may not be enough to calm the waters, particularly given Palm's recent track record. A succession of so-so handhelds and an increasingly shored-up operating system have already played a part in pushing Palm out of the top handheld spot, as did the ditching of the Palm brand in 2003. 'Palm' is back (after paying PalmSource \$30 million for sole rights to the Palm name in 2005), but now what?

In his letter, Colligan said the company wanted to "deliver the Palm experience on Windows Mobile", but he's missing the point by a significant margin. That "Palm experience" isn't about hardware, it's about software and it was the Palm OS that made Palm such a success. Unfortunately, Palm OS 5 has seen better days and OS 6 is nowhere to be found.

Worse still, Palm OS is now in the hands of Japanese mobile phone software

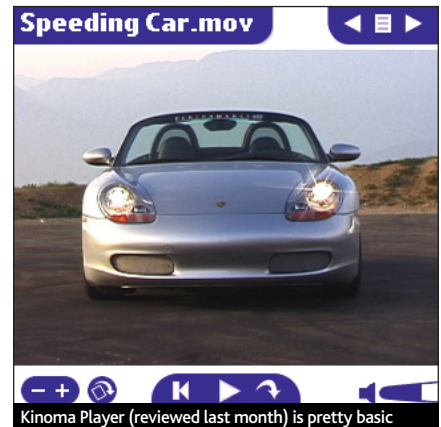
company Access, following a \$324 million (around £188m) deal earlier this year. Palm has pledged to stick with Palm OS until 2010, but with Windows Mobile in its grasp, it's easy to see where the future lies.

◀ The Windows Mobile-based Treo 700w could be the end for Palm software



Last month we looked at ways of converting video into a format suitable for watching on a Palm OS device. The conversion, which is known as transcoding, involves reducing the resolution and frame rate of video to give smooth playback, and then compressing it so an entire movie can fit on a memory card. If it sounds like hard work, that's because it is. But one application does it all for you; just put normal video in, click a button and handheld-suitable video comes out. That application is PocketDivXEncoder. Apart from being extremely easy to operate, it's also free to download and use from <http://divx.ppccool.com>.

Now you have video on your memory card, you need a way to play it, and that's our focus this month. Fortunately, video playback on Palm OS is far simpler than video transcoding on a PC, since there are only a few programs worth looking at. We mentioned Kinoma Player last month, as it's a



Kinoma Player (reviewed last month) is pretty basic

partner program to the Kinoma Producer transcoder, but it isn't terribly impressive. That leaves just two other video players, and we've taken a look at both this month.

THE MEDIA PLAYER

MMPlayer is shareware and costs \$15 (around £8.70) to register. You can try out the demo version for nothing, although the volume and contrast start to fade after a minute's playback, which should be enough time for you to make a decision about buying. It's a capable program that can play audio and video, although we're concentrating on its video performance here.

The program is Palm OS 5-only, but it will run on a wide range of handhelds, including the Treo 600 and 650. It needs to be installed in the main memory rather than on a memory card and takes up around 1.1MB. The default skin is functional, but it's advisable to install one of the many third-party skins to make the program more user-friendly. The blue skin shown in the screenshot below left, for example, takes up 133KB of main memory. Videos can be stored on either a memory card or in the main memory, although in the latter case they need to be converted to .pdb format first. The MMPlayer site explains how to do this.

MMPlayer can handle many video codecs, including MPEG2, DivX and XviD, although you'll need a high-specification handheld for smooth playback of high-resolution videos. If you use a program such as PocketDivXEncoder to transcode video to a more handheld-friendly format first, processor power becomes less of an issue. Even so, performance is less than stellar on all but the most beefy devices and on our test Sony Clie PEG-TH55, high-quality video (MPEG4 464x288, 24fps) played back at a lower frame rate than normal (13.5fps) and led to a few dropped frames and decoding glitches. The TH55 is hardly a pocket powerhouse, but it's interesting to note that the same videos played smoothly in TCPMP (see opposite).

REVIEW SUMMARY MEDIA PLAYER

MMPLAYER

RATING ★★★★★

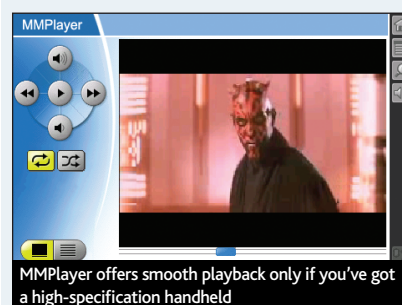
PRICE \$18 (around £10)

DETAILS www.mmplayer.com

MMPlayer can handle many video codecs, including MPEG2, DivX and XviD, although you'll need a high-specification handheld for smooth playback of high-resolution videos. If you use a program such as PocketDivXEncoder to transcode video to a more handheld-friendly format first, processor power becomes less of an issue. However, this program only works best on more powerful devices.

Those issues aside, MMPlayer is a polished application that's full of features.

- ✓ Slick presentation; plenty of features
- ✗ Video playback performance could be better



MMPlayer offers smooth playback only if you've got a high-specification handheld



REVIEW SUMMARY MEDIA PLAYER

TCPMP

RATING ★★★★★

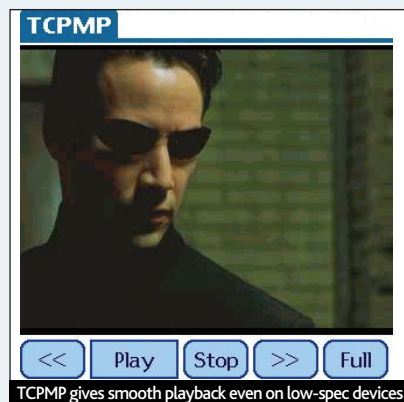
PRICE Free

DETAILS <http://tcpmp.corecodec.org>

TCPMP needs Palm OS 5, but the program is still in beta form and is only at version 0.66. It's still highly usable, but you'll need to be prepared for the odd crash here and there, particularly when you stop a video clip playing in full-screen mode on some handhelds. However, performance is excellent, and we enjoyed smooth, full-speed playback of even high-quality video on our middling-specification Clie.

✓ Smooth performance on low-power devices; free

✗ Prone to crashing; basic interface



Performance issues aside, MMPlayer is a polished application that's full of features. Videos can be queued in a 'now playing' playlist, and playlists can be saved for later use. You can also add bookmarks to videos, much like chapter stops on a DVD movie. How video looks depends on the screen that's displaying it, of course, but MMPlayer has brightness and contrast controls to help

CAN I IMPROVE MY SCREEN'S RESPONSIVENESS?

Q I recently bought a second-hand Tungsten T2 via eBay. I bagged it for a bargain price and it works almost perfectly, but the screen-touch sensor is unreliable. It seems to lose calibration and taps are often registered some distance away from where the stylus is actually making contact with the screen. Any ideas?

Marian Donleavy

A Touch-sensitive screens can lose accuracy with age, but before diagnosing this, it's worth checking that the previous owner wasn't using a screen protector.

REVIEW GAME

ZANE GAMES
Edge

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

DETAILS www.zanegames.com

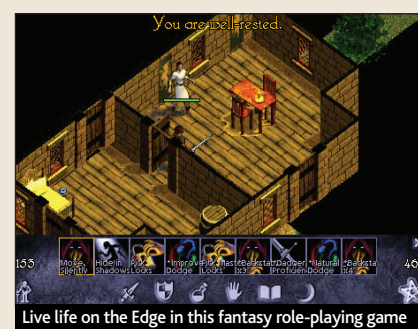
The demise of the Zodiac may have dealt a bit of a blow to Palm OS as a gaming platform, but new titles are still being released. Zane Games' Edge is a fantasy role-playing game in the tried and tested mould, which is far from a criticism: this is good, solid hack-and-slash fun that harks back to the golden age of computer gaming.

The game kicks off with creating a character, where you choose from three different races and four classes, and assign a handful of points to various statistics such as strength, intellect and dexterity. A nice touch is the ability to tweak your character's appearance, too, although at the size he or she is portrayed in the game you'd be hard pressed to spot the differences.

Edge gives a 2D isometric view of the world, much like the PC game Diablo. It bears more than a passing resemblance to this classic, too. Your character's wellbeing is measured in health and mana points, and movement is handled by

tapping the screen to point to where you want to walk to, though you can use the four-way pad too. Although the small screen no doubt helps, Edge also looks extremely sharp, and it's clear that a large amount of time and effort has been spent making the game look good.

If there's a downside to Edge, it's that it's rather hard to get started, and you'll need to hunt down some weapons and armour before attempting to take on any of the wandering nasties. The Edge website has a few tips, though, and it's certainly worth persevering past the few early levels to get into the game proper. From here on in you're sent on a variety of quests that mix combat and puzzles and should have you glued to your handheld's screen for hours.



compensate for dodgy displays, as well as a set of audio-equalisation sliders.

THE CORE POCKET MEDIA PLAYER

The Core Pocket Media Player (TCPMP) is an open-source video-playback program that's available for Pocket PC and Palm OS. The Palm version needs Palm OS 5, but the program is still in beta form. It's still usable, but you'll need to be prepared for the odd crash, particularly when you stop a video clip playing in full-screen mode on some handhelds.

Like MMPlayer, TCPMP can play audio and video, and it resides in main memory. A basic installation for video playback requires 650KB of space, and adding MP3 support increases this to 740KB. Support for a wide range of other codecs increases the memory footprint to 1.92MB, but you're unlikely to need any of these.

You can queue files for playback in TCPMP, but as yet there's no option to save playlists or add bookmarks to files. You can adjust the brightness, contrast and colour balance of the image, though, and also boost the sound volume for those handhelds with a weedy speaker. As with MMPlayer, TCPMP can also play full-screen video in landscape mode, even on those devices that don't have a screen rotate option built into the OS.

TCPMP is nowhere near as polished as MMPlayer but, while its interface is rather crude, its simplicity makes it extremely easy to use. Skins are in the pipeline, so it shouldn't be long before the program becomes better looking. One area where you might falter with TCPMP, however, is in its documentation. While MMPlayer has whole areas of its website dedicated to using the program, TCPMP users are limited to asking questions in an unofficial forum and hoping someone posts a reply.

These rough edges are soon swept aside when it comes to performance, though. It's excellent, with smooth, full-speed playback of even high-quality video on our middling-specification Clie, and it puts MMPlayer's performance in the shade.

VIDEO PLAYERS: VERDICT

If you own a relatively high-specification Palm device and want a slick audio and video playback application, MMPlayer is certainly worth the price. But don't splash out until you've tried the excellent and free TCPMP first. **CS**

CONTACT

PALM EXPERT

If there is anything you would like to see covered in *Palm Expert*, please contact us at the address below

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